Managing conflict: Third-party interventions for managers

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Executive Overview

Managers are frequently called upon to intervene as third parties in organizational conflicts within their work units but often feel ill at ease and poorly equipped to do so. The purpose of this article is to provide answers to some common questions managers have concerning such third-party interventions.

The article begins by presenting a conceptual framework. It indicates the steps for the manager to follow in making the relevant decisions concerning intervention and outlines different approaches for third-party intervention. It identifies the key variables to consider for each step of the decision process concerning intervention and presents guidelines for making the relevant choices. It suggests helpful ways of intervening in order to help the parties deal with their own conflict and describes a variety of pitfalls that the manager must beware of when making third-party interventions. The article identifies some of the competencies managers need when intervening as third parties. It concludes by indicating under what conditions the manager is not the appropriate person to intervene and suggests ways of making use of an independent resource person.

The vice president and the human resource manager of a company, who have very different management styles, are involved in a highly acrimonious conflict concerning the organization’s participatory management philosophy. The VP accuses the HRM of destroying the consensual approach he has developed, while the HRM claims that this approach is paralyzing decision making. Their opposing management styles, one participatory and slow, the other directive and rapid, tend to clash and create additional frictions. Their dispute has broken out in public, and the entire management team is divided into opposing clans. The work climate and the productivity of the management team have deteriorated. The president wonders how to intervene to help resolve this conflict.

Managers in both the private and public sectors are continually confronted with conflicts like this and, indeed, spend a large part of their time managing conflicts of various kinds. Although some conflicts are relatively simple, cause little harm, and can be dealt with by the parties themselves or through normal management practices, many others are complex and can have serious impacts on productivity, group and organizational climate, and morale.

Consequently, when conflict arises within their work units, even if it does not involve them directly, managers may need to intervene as third parties in order to ensure that the conflict is dealt with effectively. The focus of this article is on such third-party interventions by managers in organizational conflicts.

When faced with situations in which two parties are in conflict, managers may make several kinds of errors. They may intervene unnecessarily, wasting time and energy and preventing employees from taking responsibility for their conflicts. The intervention itself may be done in inappropriate ways which exacerbate the conflict or even embroil the manager in it as an active participant. Alternatively, the manager may avoid acting when intervention is necessary, allowing the conflict to escalate and spiral out of control, progressively undermining performance and morale.

Many managers feel ill at ease about intervening in other people’s conflicts and ill-equipped to do so. They wonder when intervention is appropriate, how to intervene effectively, and how to avoid the pitfalls that await them. The purpose of this article is to provide some answers to these questions, both for managers themselves and for management teachers, trainers, and consultants.
Managers should develop their capacities for third-party intervention in conflicts for several reasons. Within the context of increasing use by organizations of more participatory management approaches based on empowerment of personnel, conflict management and third-party intervention skills will probably become more and more relevant. Appropriate third-party intervention can improve the working relationships of the protagonists and can help them develop their own conflict-management, communications, and problem-solving skills. Such intervention is particularly important in light of the increasing use of teams in organizations, since the way teams manage their own conflicts can have an important impact on team performance.\(^2\)

**Appropriate third-party intervention can improve the working relationships of the protagonists and can help them develop their own conflict-management, communications, and problem-solving skills.**

The article begins by presenting a conceptual framework. It then briefly indicates the steps for the manager to follow in making intervention decisions and outlines different approaches that can be used for third-party intervention. Drawing on the conceptual framework, it next identifies the key variables to consider for each step of the decision process. The article then presents guidelines for deciding if intervention by the manager or by an independent resource person is appropriate and, if so, for choosing the relevant approach. It suggests helpful ways of intervening in order to aid the parties to deal with their own conflict and describes a variety of pitfalls that the manager must beware of when making third-party interventions. The article then identifies some of the competencies managers need when intervening as third parties. It concludes by indicating under what conditions the manager is not the appropriate person to intervene and suggesting ways to use an independent resource person. For the purpose of illustration, examples are provided based on our opening case example of the VP and the HRM and on our observations of a series of role play exercises of the case that were conducted during executive development seminars on conflict management.\(^3\)

**Conceptual Framework**

The contents of this article are based upon the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.\(^4\) The model is that of the simplest case: managerial intervention in conflict situations involving two individual protagonists.\(^5\) The framework posits that conflict arises from interactions and communications between protagonists who are involved in a relationship, either short term or long term, with a level of interpersonal trust varying from very low to very high. The protagonists have specific characteristics, including their individual interests, their ability to manage conflict, and their relative hierarchical statuses. Major variables that shape the conflict and its evolution include the protagonists' respective concerns as regards both content issues and emotional issues; the nature of their specific interests at stake in the conflict; their degree of motivation to settle the conflict; and the nature of the resulting dynamics of interaction, including both their respective perceptions and assumptions and their respective conflict behaviors. The conflict itself produces a variety of impacts on the protagonists, their entourage, their organizational unit, their manager, and other parties within or outside the organization. These impacts may vary in their importance and in the urgency with which they must be dealt. They feed back into the protagonists' relationship and communications and thus into the evolution of the conflict itself, just as the conflict impacts upon the ongoing nature of the protagonists' communications and their relationship.

The manager's own personal and managerial characteristics, including the manager's own interests, biases and conflict-intervention capacities, influence the possibilities for intervention in the conflict. The nature of the manager's relationship with the protagonists, including the degree of interpersonal trust and their relative statuses, also conditions the intervention possibilities. When the manager intervenes, there is interaction and reciprocal feedback between the manager and the protagonists and their conflict. Since in some situations the manager cannot or should not intervene, the manager may need to make use of an independent resource person to intervene or to assist in the intervention.

Finally, this all takes place within a context which includes other actors, be they individuals, groups, organizational units or levels, etc. Too many variables enter into play at this level for all of them to be dealt with in this article. However, one type of variable which impacts on the communications and relationships between the manager and the protagonists and which influences the conflict and managerial intervention possibilities in significant ways is that of culture and cultural differences, including national, organizational,
and departmental cultures. Underlining this variable is important, even though space limitations make dealing with it in any detail impossible.⁶

Steps in the Decision Process

In the interest of effectiveness and efficiency, the manager should invest no more (and no less) time and energy in conflict management than is necessary and appropriate. Consequently, when confronted with a conflict situation, the first step in the process is to decide whether or not somebody should intervene. The protagonists themselves, for example, might handle a minor conflict. If the manager deems intervention advisable, the second step is to determine what type of intervention is appropriate. The third step is to determine whether or not the manager is the appropriate person to intervene. Several reasons, such as personal bias, lack of intervention skills, or insufficient time, might lead the manager not to intervene personally. In such a case, the fourth step is to determine whether and in what way an independent resource person should intervene. These four steps are summarized in Table 1.

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Third-Party Approaches for Managers

Managers are responsible for the optimal functioning and productivity of their work unit. They must therefore take into account the impacts of the conflict both on the work unit and on the organization in order to decide whether or not to intervene and what approach should be used if intervention is deemed appropriate. Depending on the impacts of the conflict, as well as on the capacity of the protagonists to manage their conflict, the manager may wish to exercise a greater or lesser degree of
Table 1
Steps in the Decision Process

1. Is intervention necessary or appropriate?
2. If so, what type of intervention is most appropriate?
3. Is the manager the appropriate person to intervene?
4. If not, should the services of an independent resource person be provided? If so, how might the manager make use of the resource person?

control both over the conflict-management process and over the final outcome, that is, the solutions to the conflict.⁹

In addition, depending on the nature of the conflict, it may be appropriate to deal with content issues or emotional issues or both. Content issues include such substantive concerns as incompatible goals and priorities, differences about appropriate means to achieve ends, and the sharing of scarce resources. Emotional issues involve feelings such as anger, frustration, or hurt that often arise from normative expectations and judgments about the other person’s behavior.⁹ In our example, the application of the participatory management philosophy was a content issue, whereas the acrimonious disputes between the VP and the HRM both generated and resulted from emotional issues such as personal dislike and increasing frustration and anger. The two types of issues may require different kinds of interventions,¹⁰ content issues lending themselves to cognitive approaches and emotional issues to approaches involving restructuring of perceptions and working through feelings. Consequently, the choice of an approach should consider the degree of emphasis that should be placed on each type of issue.

The main types of approaches that a manager may use can be classified according to these two sets of factors, as shown in Table 2.¹¹ They are presented in the following paragraphs.

Approaches Based on Little or No Control Over Either the Outcome or the Process

Intervening in conflict situations necessarily involves the use of resources, such as time and energy, which might better be devoted to other purposes. In the interest of effectiveness and efficiency, the manager should invest no more resources in intervention than is necessary. Therefore, one option to be considered by the manager is to decide not to intervene, which involves not exercising control over either the process or the final outcome.¹² If, for example, the manager were to judge that the conflict was neither important nor urgent and that the protagonists were quite capable of resolving it themselves, it would be both unnecessary and inappropriate to intervene.

A second approach in which little control is exercised over either the final outcome or the conflict-resolution process is by providing impetus. Here the manager initially sounds out the disputants to determine the source of their conflict and then demands that they themselves resolve it, with the threat of sanctions if they do not do so.¹³ However, providing impetus can also be done in a positive way by alerting or sensitizing protagonists to the need to settle the conflict and by motivating them to resolve the conflict and to implement the appropriate solutions. This type of intervention involves a low level of control over both the process and the final outcome and a low degree of emphasis on both the content issues and the emotional issues.

Approaches Based on High Outcome Control and High Process Control

At the other extreme, the manager may wish to exert full control over both the final outcome and the process of conflict resolution by using an autocratic approach.¹⁴ This strategy may be preferred when the impacts are major, resolution is urgent, and the protagonists are incapable of dealing with the conflict. It consists of the manager obtaining whatever information is deemed necessary, deciding on the appropriate solution to the conflict, applying this solution, and requiring the protagonists to comply. The autocratic approach maintains a high degree of control over both outcome and process and combines a high level of emphasis on content and a low level on the emotional issues. In some instances, the solution might even be to separate the protagonists through structural change or transferring one or both.¹⁵

Arbitration is an approach in which the third party maintains a high level of control over the final outcome and a medium to high degree of control over the resolution process. Many disputes, such as labor-management conflicts, are dealt with through formal arbitration procedures where the process is highly structured and controlled by the arbitrator. In organizational contexts, managers often perform arbitration more informally, as protagonists bring their conflict to them and ask them to settle it. In some cases the manager maintains a fairly high level of control over both the conflict process and the final outcome.¹⁶ The process includes taking the initiative to intervene as arbitrator; determining the rules of the process; controlling the discussion between the disputants; making the final decision; and enforcing the appli-
Table 2
A Classification of Third-Party Intervention Approaches for Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third-party intervention approaches</th>
<th>Degree of control exercised over the final outcome</th>
<th>Degree of control exercised over the process</th>
<th>Degree of emphasis placed on the protagonists' content issues</th>
<th>Degree of emphasis placed on the protagonists' emotional issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing impetus</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arbitration</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating bargaining</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative problem solving</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cation of the outcome. In other cases the manager may exercise a lesser degree of control over the conflict process, intervening only upon the request of the two parties and basically listening to the protagonists' arguments before making the decision. Arbitration is centered on content issues rather than on emotional issues.

Many disputes, such as labor-management conflicts, are dealt with through formal arbitration procedures where the process is highly structured and controlled by the arbitrator.

Approaches Based on High Process Control and Low Outcome Control

These approaches are focused mainly on the manager's control of the process of conflict management, with a relatively low level of control over the final outcome. They include facilitating bargaining and collaborative problem solving.

Facilitating bargaining, as the name suggests, is an approach in which the third party helps the disputants to identify their content concerns and to use a bargaining process in order to find mutually satisfactory compromises. Bargaining is essentially a distributive approach in which one party's gains constitute the other's losses, the classic example being salary negotiations. In some instances the third party plays a somewhat active role at the content level by suggesting and communicating substantive proposals to the protagonists, although leaving them relatively free as regards the choice of solutions. In other cases the third-party role consists primarily of managing the process of interaction between the protagonists, with little involvement in the actual content of the negotiations. This approach thus involves a high level of control over the process and a relatively low level of control over the final outcome. It focuses primarily on content and little on emotional issues.

The collaborative problem-solving approach involves helping the disputants to work together both to improve their relationship and to find solutions to their conflict. With this approach, disputants jointly identify and clarify one another's major concerns, including both content and emotional issues; diagnose the nature of the dynamics of their interaction; identify and choose relevant solutions; and implement these solutions. The role of the third party is to facilitate this process but to leave the choice of solutions to the protagonists themselves. The approach combines a relatively high level of control over the process and a low level of control over the final outcome. As opposed to the other approaches, it combines a high level of emphasis on both content and emotional issues.

Making the Relevant Choices

Variables to Consider in Making the Choices

Table 3 draws on the elements of the conceptual model in Figure 1 to indicate the key variables that should be considered for each step of the choice process. National, organizational, and departmental cultural influences and constraints are presented as exogenous variables that influence choices in every step.

Conflict management should be done in such a way as to be effective in terms of finding optimal and timely solutions; efficient in terms of controlling or eliminating the costs of the conflict by limiting time and energies spent in the process; and enduring in terms of being implemented by the protagonists, which involves their being motivated: either committed to the solution or willing to accept an imposed solution.
Table 3
Key Variables for Steps in the Decision Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>1. Is intervention necessary?</th>
<th>2. Appropriate type of intervention?</th>
<th>3. Is the manager the appropriate person to intervene?</th>
<th>4. Use of an independent resource person?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key variables</td>
<td>Conflict impacts: • urgency • importance Protagonists’ capacity to resolve the conflict: • ability • motivation</td>
<td>Conflict impacts: • urgency • importance Protagonists’ capacity to resolve the conflict: • ability • motivation Protagonists’ relationship: • degree of trust • short term/long term Nature of issues: • Content issues • Emotional issues</td>
<td>Manager’s characteristics: • interests to defend • biases • capacities for intervention • availability Manager’s relationship with protagonists: • degree of trust • relative status</td>
<td>Manager’s characteristics: • capacities • development needs Resource person’s characteristics: • internal/external • capacities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exogenous variables</td>
<td>Cultural influences and constraints</td>
<td>Cultural influences and constraints</td>
<td>Cultural influences and constraints</td>
<td>Cultural influences and constraints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The key variables in the conceptual framework that influence the choices in both of the first two steps of the decision process are the importance and the urgency of the impacts and the capacity of the protagonists to resolve the conflict themselves, in terms of both their abilities to resolve the conflict together and their motivation to resolve it and to implement the appropriate solutions. The sixteen-cell matrix in Table 4 combines all possible combinations of these variables.

The combinations of variables in the cells of the matrix permit the manager to select the degree of outcome control and of process control to exercise. The possible choices with reference to the approaches in Table 2 are: no outcome control and no process control (NOC-NPC); low outcome control and low process control (LOC-LPC); high outcome control and high process control (HOC-HPC); and low outcome control and high process control (LOC-HPC). If a low-outcome-control and high-process-control strategy is selected, the choice of approach should be based on two additional variables: the nature of the issues and the degree of trust in the protagonists’ relationship. In some cases Table 4 suggests two alternatives: an initial strategy and a backup strategy.

**Step One: Is Intervention Appropriate?**

When the conflict is not important nor its resolution urgent (cells 13, 14, 15, and 16 in Table 4), intervention is not necessary, and the manager need not exercise active control over the conflict. Moreover, regardless of the importance and the urgency of the conflict, if the protagonists are judged capable of selecting and implementing an appropriate solution, having both the abilities required for resolving the conflict and the motivation to do so (cells 1, 5, 9, and 13), then intervention would not be appropriate. Not only would non-intervention provide an opportunity for the protagonists to take responsibility for their conflict, to “own” the solutions and to develop their relationship and conflict-management skills, but it would also save them and the manager precious time.

However, given the tendency of conflicts to escalate to the point of impasse, making resolution increasingly difficult, the manager who decides on a strategy of non-intervention would be well advised to keep an eye on the situation and intervene later if necessary.

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Table 4
Matrix of Intervention Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance and Urgency of Conflict Impacts</th>
<th>Ability High and Motivation High</th>
<th>Ability High and Motivation Low</th>
<th>Ability Low and Motivation High</th>
<th>Ability Low and Motivation Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urgent and important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>LOC-LPC</td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Provide impetus or</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arbitration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urgent and not important</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>LOC-LPC</td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Provide impetus or</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HOC-HPC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arbitration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important and not urgent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>LOC-LPC</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Provide impetus or</td>
<td>problem solving or</td>
<td>problem solving or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOC-HPC</td>
<td>Facilitating bargaining</td>
<td>Facilitating bargaining</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>problem solving or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitating bargaining</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important and not urgent</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td>NOC-NPC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*KEY: NOC-NPC: No Outcome Control and No Process Control; LOC-LPC: Low Outcome Control and Low Process Control; HOC-HPC: High Outcome Control and High Process Control; LOC-HPC: Low Outcome Control and High Process Control.

**Step Two: The Choice of the Relevant Intervention Approach**

Other factors might lead the manager to intervene at a low level of both outcome and process control by using the approach providing impetus. This approach is indicated when the protagonists have the ability to deal with the conflict but are not motivated to do so (cells 2, 6, and 10). In these cases providing impetus would aid in sensitizing the protagonists to the conflict's importance or urgency and motivating them to deal with it. This approach might involve simply alerting them and stimulating them to resolve the conflict, or it might include clarification of expectations and constraints to be respected and a follow-up schedule. However, if these attempts to motivate the protagonists fail, the manager should then exercise a greater degree of control over either the outcome or the process or both.

Exercising a high degree of control over both the outcome and the process involves using either the autocratic or the arbitration approaches. If the protagonists lack the ability to resolve an urgent conflict (cells 3, 4, 7, and 8), the time constraints inherent in the urgency of the situation indicate use of the autocratic approach, which involves deciding on the solution and imposing it. When the protagonists possess the ability to deal with an urgent conflict (cells 2 and 6) and remain unmotivated to do so after attempts at providing impetus, the manager should use the arbitration approach if time constraints permit doing so. Arbitration involves the protagonists to some extent in the resolution process, by permitting them to contribute their ideas. This approach has the potential both of using their abilities to resolve the conflict and of motivating them by increasing their commitment to or acceptance of the arbitrator's decision.

When the conflict's impacts are important but its resolution is not urgent (cells 10, 11, and 12), it is advisable to use an approach combining low outcome control and high process control (in the case of cell 10, this would be so if providing impetus failed to develop protagonist motivation to resolve the conflict). Involving the protagonists fully in the resolution process would increase their perceptions of the fairness of the process itself, which would permit them to use their abilities (in cell 10) to identify a quality solution, and would develop their ownership of and commitment to the solution, thus developing their motivation where necessary (in cells 10 and 12). In cell 11, where their motivation is high but their
abilities low, this approach would help develop their abilities.

Of the two low-content-control and high-processcontrol approaches, facilitating bargaining is indicated when the parties’ concerns are primarily divergent content issues that can be dealt with through bargaining. It is not focused on emotional issues and therefore is not adequate to deal with these. However, facilitating bargaining may be appropriate for dealing with certain quantifiable content issues within a broader collaborative problem-solving approach which can take emotional issues into account.

A collaborative problem-solving approach would be indicated in situations in which the protagonists’ interests are mainly convergent and in which both content issues and emotional issues need to be dealt with. In addition, when the protagonists are expected to work closely together in the future, the collaborative problem-solving approach may help them not only to find creative solutions to content issues and to develop the understanding and commitment required to implement them, but also to work through the emotional issues and improve the relationship in ways which may facilitate their future cooperation. It may also help them to develop skills for managing other conflicts which may eventually arise (especially for cells 11 and 12, where ability is low), thus making them less dependent on the manager’s interventions. Indeed, the full involvement of the protagonists in the conflict-management process is a more transformative approach, which fosters individual and collective responsibility, autonomy, empowerment, and learning. However, collaborative problem solving will not work unless the protagonists’ relationship is characterized by a certain degree of trust. Before engaging in this approach, the manager must verify the existing trust level.

**Collaborative problem solving will not work unless the protagonists' relationship is characterized by a certain degree of trust.**

Our discussion of the choice process has been presented as if only one intervention approach is necessary for a given conflict. In reality, intervention may involve using more than one approach, even combining several approaches sequentially, depending on the issues. Some issues identified in a collaborative problem-solving approach may best be dealt with by facilitating bargaining, others by creative problem solving or by exploring perceptions and emotional issues. Protagonist trust may erode as the conflict evolves, preventing the use of collaborative problem solving. Consequently, the intervener may be obliged to change approaches as the intervention proceeds, increasing or decreasing outcome or process control. In addition, national, organizational, and departmental cultures may favor the use of some types of intervention and constrain the use of others. These considerations must be kept in mind throughout the process of choice and intervention.

**Managerial Use of the Approaches**

Given the benefits of the process-control-centered approaches we have outlined, especially collaborative problem solving, one would expect managers to use them when possible. Indeed, when asked, managers state that they do use them or at least prefer them. However, some research results indicate that managers actually tend to make relatively little use of these approaches.

One explanation given for their infrequent use is that managers often lack the confidence and the requisite skills to manage the process. In the following sections, we will present some helpful ways of intervening when using process control, examine some of the pitfalls managers should be wary of, and identify the requisite competencies for using these approaches. We will then return to the last two steps in our process: determining whether the manager or an independent resource person should intervene and identifying how the manager may make use of this resource person.

**Helpful Ways of Intervening With Process-Centered Approaches**

The following paragraphs present a series of helpful ways of intervening (see Table 5 for a summary of these ways) when using the high-process-control, low-content-control approaches, especially collaborative problem solving. The third party’s intervention should aim, whenever appropriate, not only at resolving the immediate conflict and improving the longer-term relationship, but also at developing the protagonists’ conflict-management skills and attitudes in the longer term. Intervention should be based on active involvement of the protagonists, respecting and developing their autonomy and responsibility throughout the process. This approach can be used only if there is a sufficient degree of trust, both between the protagonists themselves and between the third party and the protagonists. Otherwise the protagonists will not be ready to engage in an
Table 5
Ways of Intervening with Process-Centered Approaches

- Clarify the issues and the interests at stake
- Examine the interrelations between interests and their degree of convergence or divergence
- Facilitate the choice of the relevant approach for resolving the conflict
- Identify appropriate conflict-resolution processes
- Clarify the dynamics of interaction and implications for resolving the conflict
- Identify assumptions and reframe the understanding of the conflict
- Identify and re-examine mutual stereotypes and perceptions
- Facilitate communications
- Model appropriate communications through restating, reflecting, and summarizing
- Propose appropriate communication processes and procedures
- Identify inappropriate behaviors and propose more effective ones
- Increase awareness of the conflict’s real costs and benefits

open dialogue, and the intervention will fail or even exacerbate the conflict. The manager must therefore verify the trust levels before intervening in this way. Some difficulties in creating and maintaining trust for managerial intervention are discussed in the section on pitfalls in third-party intervention later in this article.

Disputants often make untested assumptions about what motivates the other party and have relatively limited knowledge of the other party’s real concerns. In our role-play exercises, the VP assumed that the HRM was after his job, and the HRM believed that the VP’s insistence on participation was a cover-up for his own inability to make decisions. In such a situation, interventions by the third party to clarify the various issues for both disputants are essential. Clarification involves helping protagonists express and understand each other’s concerns, bringing out both content and emotional issues where appropriate, clarifying the relative importance of these issues to them, and searching for underlying interests rather than fixed bargaining positions.54

Disputants often make untested assumptions about what motivates the other party and have relatively limited knowledge of the other party’s real concerns.

The third party can also help the disputants to examine the interrelations between their interests in order to determine to what extent they are convergent or divergent. This examination is important for two reasons. In the first place, protagonists often assume that their interests are incompatible when they may not be. During our role-play exercises, when the VP and the HRM discussed the organization’s participatory management-by-objectives philosophy, they each tended to put almost total emphasis on one major aspect of the philosophy to the exclusion of the other. The VP focused on the participatory aspect and the HRM on the attaining of objectives, in such a way that they ended up putting participation and effectiveness in opposition. Their dysfunctional dynamics of interaction reinforced this polarization. In actual fact, however, both aspects must be part of such a philosophy. On those occasions when the third party helped them explore ways in which they could improve the actual practice of the philosophy by taking both aspects into account, making the participation more effective and the objectives more participatory, the protagonists found that their concerns were not as divergent as they had assumed.

A second reason for exploring protagonist interests is that the appropriate processes for protagonists to use with convergent and with divergent interests are not the same. For mainly convergent interests with super-ordinate goals, problem solving is more appropriate, whereas when interests are primarily divergent, a bargaining approach is preferable.55 Helping clarify the degree of convergence or divergence of interests can therefore make it easier to facilitate the choice of the most relevant approach for managing the conflict.

Another important type of intervention is to help the disputants to understand the nature of their dynamics of interaction. In our role-play exercises, the tendency of each protagonist to focus on only one dimension of the management philosophy reinforced the polarization of their positions. The more the VP emphasized participation, the more the HRM felt the need to focus on effectiveness, which led the VP to put even more emphasis on the participatory dimension which seemed to be lacking in the HRM’s approach, and so on. When the third party was able to help them clarify this polarization dynamic, it opened up the possibility of examining the problem in more fruitful ways.

As stated above, disputants tend to make erroneous assumptions about the conflict situation and about the other party, which may contribute to escalation. Such assumptions include the belief that the interests are mutually incompatible and that the conflict is necessarily win-lose in nature. Although the latter assumptions may well be true
in some circumstances, often they are not. The third party must therefore identify the assumptions made by the disputants, to clarify their validity and, when necessary, to help disputants change their assumptions, to reframe their understanding of the situation. One important aspect of reframing is linked to the protagonists’ deteriorating relationship. Each protagonist often develops more and more negative perceptions of the other which become increasingly stereotypical. In the role-play exercises, the VP saw the HRM as more and more ambitious and authoritarian, while the HRM viewed the VP as more and more weak and indecisive. Their interactions aimed at correcting each other’s behavior only reinforced it and generated increasing mutual hostility. In such situations the relationship and the associated emotional issues are as much a problem as the content issues and need to be addressed. Interventions by the third party which lead the disputants to identify and to re-examine their mutual stereotypes and perceptions can be helpful in this regard.

The above-mentioned ways of intervening are only possible if communications between the protagonists function effectively, which is generally not the case when conflict escalates. Consequently, one of the most fundamental kinds of third-party intervention consists in facilitating communications. This may involve helping them separately to express their concerns, acting if necessary as an intermediary to communicate messages back and forth, or facilitating face-to-face communications between them by the use of appropriate questions and by restating, reflecting, and summarizing. It also comprises proposing appropriate processes and procedures for communicating separately and together. In addition, the third party can model these appropriate communication behaviors.

This latter point brings us to another important form of third-party intervention: proposing and managing relevant conflict-management processes for protagonists to use. They frequently tend to adopt dysfunctional win-lose or avoidance approaches. Consequently, they may need help in identifying and applying more appropriate processes, such as bargaining, problem solving, or arbitration, and in adopting more specific procedures which favor valid communications and problem solving. If they slip back into dysfunctional behaviors and tactics, the third party can help by identifying these and suggesting more effective ways of interacting.

Disputants often persist in win-lose or avoidance strategies as long as they perceive advantages in using such approaches. Frequently their perceptions of the relative costs and benefits of pursuing or avoiding the conflict are shortsighted. In our role-play exercises, protagonists continued their conflict, unaware of its real costs in terms of productivity, climate, and morale. It may therefore be necessary for the third party to sensitize the protagonists to the real costs and benefits of the conflict in order for them to develop the motivation required to engage in more productive processes for managing it.

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**Disputants often persist in win-lose or avoidance strategies as long as they perceive advantages in using such approaches.**

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**Pitfalls in Third-Party Interventions**

When practiced skillfully and in the appropriate situations, these ways of intervening can effectively contribute to conflict resolution. However, the third-party role is subject to a number of pitfalls that await the unwary. We will now describe some of the major pitfalls that the manager wishing to act as third party must guard against.

**Pitfalls Related to Disputant Expectations and Strategies**

When disputants perceive a conflict situation in win-lose terms, they tend to seek allies. When the third party intervenes, each disputant may thus perceive the interraver as either a potential ally or a potential enemy allied with the adversary. Protagonists therefore act toward the third party in ways intended to help them identify which side the third party is on and to recruit the intervener as an ally. They scrutinize the third party’s every action and interpret its meaning to help them decide whether the third party is on their side or on the other’s side. They test the third party with questions and comments to determine that person’s leanings. And they act in often subtle ways to recruit the third party as an ally.

In our role play exercises, if the president had the misfortune to refer innocently to “our” participatory management philosophy, the VP would take this as a sign that the president was on his side, since they had initially developed the philosophy together, while the HRM would also assume that the president was on the VP’s side and against the HRM. In order to win the president’s support, the VP would often begin the discussion by referring in glowing terms to “our participatory management philosophy which we worked so hard together to
create and which the HRM is seriously undermining," whereas the HRM would speak of "the importance for both of us of making this philosophy work effectively and not letting it become paralyzed by the VP's inability to make decisions."

The manager intervening as a third party must constantly keep in mind this tendency to perceive the third party as a potential ally or enemy. Whenever choosing process-control approaches that require the third party to remain neutral, the manager must identify the limits within which such neutrality is possible and then make clear to the protagonists an intention not to take sides within those limits. The manager must not only maintain strict impartiality but also the appearance of impartiality. This means paying attention to the protagonists' interpretations of intervention behavior, resisting attempts by protagonists to win favor, and behaving in ways which clearly manifest impartiality.

The unwary third party who does not succeed in establishing impartiality risks losing credibility in several ways. The disputant who sees the third party as partial to the other side will view any further intervention with suspicion and the final outcome as unfair. And even the protagonist who benefits from gaining the third party as an ally may doubt the third party's capacity for impartiality, thus reducing the credibility required for future interventions. In addition, the third party who gets seduced by one or the other protagonist becomes an ally of one party and the enemy of the other. When the third party also becomes a protagonist, the conflict becomes even more complex and difficult to resolve, and the third party becomes incapable of playing any further effective helping role.

Another trap for the third party is the tendency of the disputants to misunderstand the nature of the intervention. Protagonists often tend to bargain when problem solving would be more appropriate and to control information when the third party is trying to facilitate a collaborative problem-solving process based upon open communication. They may also attempt to restrict the discussion solely to content issues and to exclude emotional issues that may also need to be dealt with. They may demand that the third party act as an intermediary when that person attempts to facilitate direct, face-to-face communications. Protagonists frequently see the third-party facilitator as a potential arbitrator and try to persuade the third party of the value of their position in order to influence a final judgment. Consequently, the third party must at the outset define and explain clearly to the protagonists the nature of the approach to be used and must keep reminding them throughout the intervention.40

**Protagonists often tend to bargain when problem solving would be more appropriate and to control information when the third party is trying to facilitate a collaborative problem-solving process based upon open communication.**

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**Pitfalls Related to the Managerial Role When Acting as a Third Party**

The manager's role of hierarchical superior is another potential pitfall, when intervening as a third party in conflicts. This is especially true in conflicts between the manager's immediate subordinate and that person's immediate subordinate. In our president's intervention, the conflict involves his immediate subordinate, the VP, and the latter's subordinate, the HRM. In our role-play exercises, the VP usually demands the president's total and absolute support, basing this demand upon the "principle" of hierarchical solidarity and arguing that anything less would be disloyal and would undercut the VP's authority. This attitude puts the president in a dilemma, caught between this so-called principle and the perception that the VP may be at least partially in the wrong.

One way of continuing to make clear the intervention's nature could be to use the approach of providing impetus, by delegating responsibility for resolution to the more senior of the two protagonists within a framework of expectations and then assuring follow-up with that protagonist. However, the danger of such an approach is to allow the more senior of the protagonists to use positional power against the subordinate in a win-lose strategy.41 Consequently, the manager not wishing to intervene personally would be well advised to use a neutral third party to intervene either as a mediator, in order to help the protagonists find a mutually satisfactory solution, or as an arbitrator. The manager wishing to intervene more actively could reflect support and loyalty to the immediate subordinate on an overall basis (where possible) but neutrality or even disagreement on specific issues. For example, the president could reconfirm his overall confidence in the VP as a VP, while indicating the desire to see improvements in the practice of the management philosophy by both protagonists.
Pitfalls Related to the Manager's Personal Characteristics

The manager's own biases constitute another trap. These biases may be of several sorts. They may include the manager's conception of the general nature of conflict or a predilection for certain kinds of solutions. For example, the manager who believes that all conflict situations should be dealt with by fostering improved communications and trust may be led by such beliefs to make dysfunctional interventions in conflicts whose sources are structural or based on incompatible interests. The manager may also be biased by personal preferences, such as liking or disliking one of the protagonists, or professional identification with one side or the other, which may seriously undermine the manager's credibility and effectiveness. The manager must try to be aware of these biases to control their effects on managerial behavior, to choose a relevant intervention approach or, if necessary, to provide an independent resource person when the manager chooses not to intervene.

Finally, the manager's own personal needs may well constitute potential pitfalls. These may include the manager's need for clarity, control, harmony, or rationality. Managers who place great value on decisiveness, or who have difficulty tolerating the ambiguity of unresolved conflict, may succumb to the temptation of intervening too rapidly or pushing too fast for quick solutions. They may also become vulnerable to disputant tactics aimed at shifting their own responsibility for conflict management onto the manager's shoulders.

Managers who place great value on decisiveness, or who have difficulty tolerating the ambiguity of unresolved conflict, may succumb to the temptation of intervening too rapidly or pushing too fast for quick solutions.

Managers with strong needs for control may be partial to intervention approaches that maintain high outcome control and may therefore prefer using an arbitration or an autocratic approach even when the situation requires a process-control-centered approach.

Managers who have strong needs for harmony may fall into the trap of avoidance or denial. This personal need may lead them to delay intervention in conflict situations where timely action might prevent disruptive escalation or to seek facile, surface solutions in order to smooth over conflict without addressing its root causes. Their need for harmony at all costs may also make them vulnerable to disputant strategies of denial aimed at keeping the manager at a distance in order to win out over the adversary.

And finally, when managers have a strong need for rationality or a fear of emotional, so-called "irrational" issues, they may avoid using interventions dealing with the emotional concerns and work only on the content issues. However, neglecting the emotional issues may lead to inadequate solutions and to the re-emergence of conflict in the future. To conclude these comments on pitfalls related to the manager's personal characteristics, the ancient Greek prescription to "Know thyself" is of particular relevance.

Competencies Required for Effective Managerial Third-Party Intervention

A variety of competencies is needed to play the third-party roles identified above. Intervention in conflict situations requires an understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal and inter-group conflict. The manager needs some knowledge of arbitration, facilitating bargaining, and collaborative problem solving as well as skills in establishing and managing appropriate procedures for these approaches. The facilitator role in the collaborative-problem-solving approach requires knowledge and skills in problem solving, relationship building, and the facilitation of interpersonal and inter-group communications and processes. Effective interpersonal communications skills are essential, including active listening (restating, reflecting, and summarizing), giving and receiving appropriate feedback, and asking good questions.

The attitudes necessary to use these skills effectively include the capacity to empathize, to reserve judgment, to accept complexity, ambiguity and contradictions, to focus on both content and process, to accept the expression of emotions and interpersonal tensions, to resist stress, and to entertain a variety of frames of reference. The intervener must maintain respect for the protagonists, whatever the third party’s own personal feelings, and must constantly work toward increased recognition and empowerment of the protagonists. Again, self-awareness is an essential quality for effective intervention.

Choice of Intervener and Use of a Resource Person

Having identified the pitfalls in third-party intervention and the attitudes and skills necessary for
effective intervention, we are now ready to examine the last two steps in our decision process.

**Step Three: Is the Manager the Appropriate Person to Intervene?**

In order to examine this question, we will refer to the manager's characteristics and relationship with the protagonists as indicated in Table 3. Does the manager have the capacity to intervene impartially? In order to decide, the manager should carefully examine the various organizational, managerial, and personal interests he or she may need or wish to defend. The manager should also take into account the extent to which his or her own biases can be overcome in order to maintain impartiality. Even if the manager is able to intervene impartially, will the protagonists recognize and acknowledge that impartiality? Do the relative hierarchical statuses of the manager and the protagonists prevent the manager from being a credible intervener?

The manager must also decide whether there is sufficient trust in his or her relationship with the protagonists (and between them) for the intervention to succeed. In addition to the questions of impartiality and credibility, the manager should also consider the issue of confidentiality. For example, the protagonists may hesitate to confide some emotional issues in the presence of the boss. Another consideration is whether the manager possesses the requisite capacities to make the required type of intervention. The manager may lack the attitudes or skills for some types of intervention, such as collaborative problem solving or facilitating bargaining, but be able to assume other types of intervention, such as arbitration. Or the manager may lack skills for some part of an intervention. In such cases an independent resource person may be needed to intervene or to assist the manager in the intervention.

And finally, is the manager available to intervene? Some types of intervention, in particular those focused on control of the process, require a considerable investment in time and energy which the manager may not be available, either physically or psychologically, to provide at the appropriate time.

**Step Four: Should an Independent Resource Person Intervene? How Can the Manager Make Use of Such Persons?**

If intervention is necessary and the manager chooses not to intervene personally, then it would be appropriate to provide an independent third-party resource to the protagonists. In our role-play exercises, for example, where the disputants are of unequal status, the president could combine the approach of providing impetus with an offer of external resource support to help the VP resolve the conflict with the HRM. In conflicts involving protagonists of equal status, the offer of help by an internal or an external resource could accompany this approach. Internal resources could include such professionals as human resources or organizational development personnel, an organizational ombudsman, or an internal mediator. External resources could include alternative dispute resolution vendors such as mediators or arbitrators.

The manager may wish to handle one part of the intervention but use an independent resource person to assist in other parts of the intervention. Examples might be the use of an external resource to facilitate a problem-solving meeting between the protagonists in which the manager participates in order to defend major organizational interests, or the use of an internal consultant to conduct interviews with the protagonists and other interested parties as part of the initial phase of the intervention process. The manager might decide to intervene personally but also use the resource person as a supporting coach in areas in which the manager lacks competence. The coaching will help develop the manager's skills and attitudes for future interventions. Managers interested in developing intervention capacities should evaluate the extent to which they possess the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes identified in Table 6. In the short term, this self-evaluation will allow them to identify the kinds of intervention they are able to make and the kinds of resources they may need to call upon. Over the long term, self-evaluation will help them to develop their competencies through coaching or through professional development activities in order to intervene more effectively as third parties in organizational conflicts.

**Table 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some Competencies Required for Third-Party Intervention</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal and intergroup conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of arbitration, facilitating bargaining, and collaborative problem-solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge and skills in problem-solving and relationship-building processes and procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Interpersonal communications skills</td>
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<td>• Skills in the facilitation of interpersonal communications and processes</td>
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Managers interested in developing intervention capacities should evaluate the extent to which they possess the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Relevance for Management in the Future

Why should managers develop interventional competencies? Beyond their usefulness in managing conflicts and in developing subordinates’ capacities to manage their own conflicts, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes useful for third-party intervention are in fact management skills which managers need in the course of their work: for negotiating, for managing their own conflicts, and for managing change.

And although the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for effective third-party intervention may not be considered normal requirements of managerial roles at present, they will become increasingly relevant to effective management in the years to come. They constitute basic competencies for an emerging form of management that is based less on traditional hierarchy and control and more on developing self-managing subordinates and teams, where the manager acts more as a delegator, motivator, and coach. Consequently, managers who work on developing these capacities may ultimately find that they have become more effective not merely as third parties in conflict situations but more broadly as managers of the complex organizations of the future.

Acknowledgments

The initial version of this article was written during sabbatical leave at the IAE Aix-en-Provence in Puyricard, France. The author wishes to thank Chester Greene, Alain Roger, and Robert Weiss, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the text.

Endnotes


3 These observations were made during a series of some forty management development seminars on conflict management. Seminar participants read a four-page description of the conflict situation. Participants volunteered to play the roles of president, VP, and HRM, the other participants acting as observers of the role-play. After a twenty-minute period of preparation, the president had one hour to intervene, with the possibility of meeting one or the other or both of the protagonists together. The observers observed all of the meetings. At the end of the hour, the entire group analyzed the phenomena observed during the role-play exercise and discussed the lessons that could be learned about conflict processes and about various intervention approaches.

4 This conceptual framework incorporates variables identified by a broad variety of authors. Specific references to the relevant authors concerning these variables are provided in endnotes throughout the article.

5 Additional variables would be required to analyze conflicts involving multiple protagonists and intergroup or interdepartmental conflicts.

6 Culture and cultural differences influence the protagonists’ communications and relationship, the importance of their relative statuses, their interpretations of the issues and of each other’s behaviors, their dynamics of interaction, the roles that the manager is expected to play, the values attributed to different types of intervention, and the conditions for intervention success. The manager’s choices must, of course, take these variables into account. For an extended discussion of the impacts of cultural differences on conflict and on conflict management, including third-party intervention, see Nugent, P. S. Les impacts des différences culturelles sur le conflit et sur la gestion des conflits. Intercultures, Avril 1994, 24: 57–80.

7 Effectiveness and efficiency must be defined, of course, in terms of the manager’s goals, both short and long term, which may include developing employee capacities to manage conflict, motivating them, or improving their decision making, as well as dealing with the conflict’s immediate impacts.


11 This classification of approaches by the factors of content and emotional issues follows Walton’s discussion of substantive and emotional concerns (Walton, op. cit.), as well as Amason, et al.’s distinction between content conflict and affective conflict (Amason, et al., op. cit.) and Jehn & Mannix’ (op. cit.) classification of task conflict, process conflict, and relationship conflict. We have chosen to use the term emotional issues rather than the term relationship used by Jehn & Mannix, in order to avoid ambiguity and confusion. Relationship issues would comprise two components: behavior and emotions resulting from perceptions and interpretations of such behavior. We prefer to address the emotional component specifically, since content issues could include protagonists’ behaviors.
We should point out that this is not the only possible classification. One might introduce other categories such as misunderstood communication and linguistic or cultural differences. However, in our conceptual framework, we have identified culture and cultural differences, at the national, organizational, and departmental levels, as exogenous variables that form part of the larger context and that condition and influence the other variables in the model.

This set of intervention approaches can be related in some ways to the different approaches which protagonists themselves use to deal with their conflict: avoidance, competition (forcing), accommodation, compromise, and collaboration (see Thomas, 1992, op. cit.). Collaborative problem-solving aims at helping protagonists to adopt an integrative approach of collaboration. Facilitating bargaining involves helping them adopt a distributive approach of compromise, and arbitration consists of the third party selecting the compromise for them. Depending on the nature of the conflict, the third party may recommend any of the five approaches to the protagonists: for example, accommodation or avoidance for some unimportant issues. It may occur that the third party ends up supporting one party against the other (competition), as in conflicts where one protagonist is clearly in the wrong or engaged in unethical pursuits.

Our use of the term non-intervention should be understood in the sense of the manager's abstaining from actively intervening. This means not actively exercising control over the final outcome or the process but does not mean that the manager relinquishes the possibility of exercising control in the future.

Sheppard, op. cit.


Ibid.

Sheppard, op. cit.; Lewicki & Sheppard, op. cit.

The descriptive term facilitating bargaining has been chosen for this type of intervention in order to avoid the confusion which arises when using the term mediation in the context of managerial intervention in conflict situations. For a discussion of this terminological problem, see Lewicki, R., Weiss, S., & Lewin, D. 1992. Models of conflict, negotiation and third party intervention: A review and synthesis. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 13(3): 45–55. Mediators often use both the collaborative problem-solving approach and facilitation of bargaining, depending on the nature of the conflict issues.


Walton, op. cit.


If the protagonists are motivated to resolve an urgent conflict (cells 3 and 7), they should normally accept an imposed solution. If they lack both ability and motivation (cells 4 and 8), time constraints would lead to the necessity of imposing a solution.

If time constraints do not permit use of arbitration, then the autocratic approach should be used.


Kolb & Glidden, op. cit.


Meyer, et al., op. cit.

Lewicki & Sheppard, op. cit.

Sheppard, op. cit.

Thomas, op. cit.

For more in-depth descriptions of process-centered approaches, see Baruch Bush & Folger, op. cit., and Littlejohn & Domenici, op. cit.

Of course, it is not always necessary or even possible to pursue all of these goals; for example, in situations in which the protagonists will have no future relationship or when they already have the required conflict-management skills.


Brown, op. cit.

Littlejohn & Domenici, op. cit.

Ibid.

Walton, op. cit.


As stated earlier in this article, the third party may combine approaches or may have to change approaches as the intervention unfolds. The third party using the approaches of collaborative problem solving or facilitating bargaining may end up having to use arbitration or an autocratic approach. In such cases, it is important to clarify for the protagonists that the final decision results from the choice of the most appropriate solution to a problem and is not a matter of taking one's side against the other. Of course, in some cases the third party may actually choose to take sides.

Walton, op. cit., points out that one condition of success for collaborative problem solving is parity of power between protagonists. In situations of unequal power, one protagonist is at an unfair advantage, and the level of trust required for open communications is absent. In addition, giving the responsibility for resolution to the more powerful protagonist would negate procedural justice and would be perceived as unfair by the less powerful protagonist. To do so would thus engender future problems and conflict.

Thomas, op. cit.

Littlejohn & Domenici, op. cit.

Baruch Bush & Folger, op. cit.


The manager's role is to ensure that conflicts are managed appropriately. As indicated in our presentation of the steps in the process of choice, in some cases it is appropriate or necessary for the manager to intervene, and in others it is clearly
inappropriate or simply not possible. In the latter cases, if intervention is necessary, then recourse should be made to an independent third party. The manager must make this decision, and the steps in the decision process aim at guiding such a choice. Again, the use of an independent third party depends on such additional factors as availability and cost effectiveness. In addition, managers should take care to use independent third parties in appropriate ways. Some managers misuse independent third parties by using them when they themselves have the responsibility to intervene, assigning them inappropriate roles, or using them to sanction decisions the manager wishes to impose.

For more detailed information about recourse to specialized internal and external resources for third-party intervention, see Cavenagh, op. cit.; see also Stainke, K. A., & Hasson, R. H. 1998. Controlling the cost of conflict: How to design a system for your organization. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Executive Commentary

Laurie A. Broedling

This article addresses an aspect of management that receives insufficient attention in contemporary literature: interpersonal relationships. While the literature is replete with considerations of strategy, markets, and organization design, behavior, and development, the fact is that the basic building block of organizations is individual people getting along with each other... or not. This aspect is not an abstraction amenable to policy or process improvements; it is specific to the real human beings involved.

The author observes correctly that the need to manage interpersonal conflict is even more important in today’s environment that puts increasing emphasis on collaboration and teamwork. I have observed a major shift in this dimension over the past 25 years, especially in the upper-management ranks. The expectation used to be that executives tolerated one another. Now the expectation is that they need to coordinate and collaborate. Part of this shift stems from the recognition, spawned by the quality movement, that it is counterproductive when organizational functions operate in an independent manner with an attempt to optimize each component. As a result, emphasis today is placed on organizational integration, which requires true cooperation among members of the executive team. Significant levels of conflict cannot be tolerated over extended periods of time. Not only is the productivity of the protagonists compromised, but, as the author notes, the effects of conflict also spill over to other organizational members, customers, suppliers and partners.

This model is definitely useful to managers in the workplace. The author presents a variety of different intervention approaches depending on the situation rather than a one-size-fits-all method. This variety is helpful because these situations can be very sensitive, and an improper intervention can make a bad situation worse. Table 2 presents a useful classification of these intervention approaches showing which is best under differing circumstances. Interestingly, only one approach places emphasis on the protagonists’ emotional issues. Yet such issues are present to some degree in most conflicts, leading one to assume that the collaborative problem-solving method would be the most popular one to employ.

From my own experience, I can support several of the author’s assertions. One is that careful consideration of whether or not to intervene is very important. This idea is similar to the physician’s credo of “first do no harm.” Another is to clarify the degree of convergence or divergence of interests between the protagonists. A third assertion that I can confirm is that the manager, in the interventionist role, needs to be careful not to inadvertently take sides or show bias toward either protagonist.

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 is quite complete. However, one factor not sufficiently spelled out is the relative hierarchical level of the participants, or differential in formal position power. The framework does include a variable of “relative status” of the protagonists, but this factor is broad while the differential in formal position power is quite specific and easier to operationalize.

This framework seems most applicable when the manager is at least one level above both protagonists in the management hierarchy and when both protagonists report directly to that manager. In cases where both of these conditions are not present, there are other considerations.
In the example given in which the protagonists are a vice president and his HR manager and the "manager" is the president, both protagonists report to the manager, but one (the HR manager) does so via the other (the vice president). In my experience one of the most difficult situations for conflict resolution is the one described in this example: conflict between a supervisor and direct subordinate. The author addresses some of the unique problems in intervening in this particular relationship. Moreover, if someone other than the president were to intervene in this example, the situation would be more like having a third-party intervention. In fact, it seems to me that this situation is generally the one most amenable to third-party intervention.

With respect to the differential in formal position power, I think the model is more applicable to situations in which the protagonists are at the same or similar hierarchical levels than when they are at different ends of the organizational hierarchy. Having had extensive experience with both sets of situations, I can say the dynamics of conflict resolution are quite different. David-and-Goliath types of conflict are more focused on uncovering all the facts, protecting both parties from false accusations, and protecting David from management reprisal. While emotions can run high, chances are that daily interpersonal interaction is low since the parties usually do not regularly interact.

One aspect of conflict management that the author does not discuss is how the conflict comes to the manager's attention. Yet this aspect can shape the manager's initial reaction to the conflict and decision about how to handle it. One common scenario is that one of the two protagonists brings it to the manager's attention in an attempt to gain the manager's support for that person's position and help in changing the other protagonist's position or style. Another common scenario is that the two protagonists keep the situation from the manager's attention in an attempt to resolve it themselves or to "tough it out." The process of ferreting out and defining conflict is perhaps as important as how to resolve it. This topic would be worthy of further development.

**The process of ferreting out and defining conflict is perhaps as important as how to resolve it.**

With respect to the specific interventions, I found collaborative problem solving to be a useful approach in a situation involving two executives where both content and emotional issues were present. In fact, since the conflict was related to managerial style, the content and emotional issues overlapped. The emotional issues were complicated by ego issues—not an uncommon occurrence in the executive world. The use of collaborative problem solving went part way, but not all the way, in reducing the tension between the two parties. However, experiences like these have led me to appreciate the growing popularity of executive coaching. Conflict is rarely a single event, and its resolution or amelioration is rarely achieved by a single intervention. Rather, ongoing support and re-direction are often required.

In analyzing this article, I could not help but consider it in light of the most profound organizational event of our time, the Enron case. Hopefully our profession will rise to the occasion and achieve an understanding of what happened and why. While Enron is an extreme case, the dynamics involved are applicable way beyond Enron. Consequently I found it interesting to juxtapose this particular model onto the current understanding of the Enron case, gleaned as of this writing from media reports and analysis. Unfortunately, most of the analysis of Enron to date has focused on the financial aspects, not the interpersonal aspects, of the case. Many executive teams were involved in creating and sustaining the Enron bubble—Enron itself, its subsidiaries and partnerships, Arthur Andersen and the auditing community, the banks and funds that invested in Enron and its partnerships, and the regulatory agencies. Within all these executive teams, surely there were at least some instances of significant interpersonal conflict over the course that these organizations were pursuing. However, until the excesses became so extreme and the recession helped to expose the weaknesses, these dissenting voices were effectively silenced.

While managing interpersonal conflict is important in the abstract, an equally important consideration is the direction in which it is managed. One common tendency appears to be the use of a top-down approach to neutralize those who want to rock the boat by seriously questioning prevailing executive thinking. While this issue was beyond the scope intended by the author, I am suggesting it as an issue worthy of serious consideration. When, how, and by whom is dissent defined as conflict? And, when are interventions invoked to eliminate it rather than recognizing its legitimacy and honoring it as an issue worthy of examination?